

Doctrine of God

Part 2 – Knowing the Unknowable

At the tender age of twenty years, Charles Spurgeon, pastor of the Park Street Chapel in London, rose to the pulpit and spoke these words:

It has been said by someone that “the proper study of mankind is man.” I will not oppose the idea, but I believe it is equally true that the proper study of God’s elect is God; the proper study of a Christian is the Godhead. The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can ever engage the attention of a child of God, is the name, the nature, the person, the work, the doings, and the existence of the great God whom he calls his Father.



There is something exceedingly improving to the mind in a contemplation of the Divinity. It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity...No subject of contemplation will tend more to humble the mind, than thoughts of God...

The most excellent study for expanding the soul, is the science of Christ, and him crucified, and the knowledge of the Godhead in the glorious Trinity. Nothing will so enlarge the intellect, nothing so magnify the whole soul of man, as a devout, earnest, continued investigation of the great subject of the Deity.

And whilst humbling and expanding, this subject is eminently consolatory. Oh, there is, in contemplating Christ, a balm for every wound; in musing on the Father, there is a quietus for every grief; and in the influence of the Holy Spirit, there is a balsam for every sore. Would you lose your sorrow? Would you drown your cares? Then go, plunge yourself in the Godhead’s deepest sea; be lost in his immensity; and you shall come forth as from a couch of rest, refreshed and invigorated. I know nothing which can so comfort the soul; so calm the swelling billows of sorrow and grief; so speak peace to the winds of trial, as a devout musing upon the subject of the Godhead.

Incomprehensibility

Throughout the Old Testament God declares his incomparable nature. That is, there is nothing that can properly be compared to God accurately. Through the Prophet Isaiah God said, “I am God, and there is no other” (Isaiah 46:9a). In chapter 40 of Isaiah we find a sustained meditation upon the incomparable nature of God. The prophet declares:

All the nations are as nothing before him,
they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.
To whom then will you liken God,
or what likeness compare with him? (vv. 17-18)

But God is not incomparable only. He is also incomprehensible. God is too large, too infinite, too perfect for human creatures to comprehend. God is not simply a greater Being than humankind. God is of an entirely different kind than man. Our minds are not adequate to contain the immensity of the everlasting God. “I am God and there is none like me” (Isaiah 46:9b). There is a great gulf fixed between what God is like and what we are like:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9)

Romans 11:33-36

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

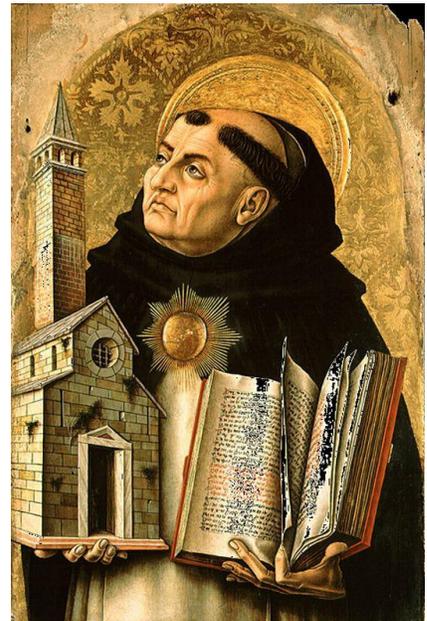
“For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?”

“Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

“We are speaking of God. Is it any wonder if you do not comprehend? Let it be a pious confession of ignorance rather than a harsh profession of knowledge. To attain some slight knowledge of God is a great blessing; to comprehend him, however, is totally impossible.”¹ - Augustine (354-430)

“No created mind can attain the perfect sort of understanding of God’s essence that is intrinsically possible. The infinite cannot be contained in the finite. God exists infinitely and nothing finite can grasp him infinitely. It is impossible for a created mind to understand God infinitely; it is impossible, therefore, to comprehend him.”² - Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)



Comprehensibility

At this point we may be tempted to throw up our hands and say, “What’s the use? If we can’t know God; if he is beyond comprehending then why are we in a course on the doctrine of God?!”

Here is where we must be warned against an improper application of God’s incomprehensibility. Certain strains of Christian mysticism and theological liberalism hold to a kind of agnosticism regarding the knowledge of God; that God is so locked away in mystery that we have nothing substantive to know or say about him. It is a failure to understand the harmony between God’s transcendence and his immanence. For God to be transcendent means that he is beyond us. On the other hand, God is also immanent, or near. Through his Word and the Person of Jesus Christ God has chosen to come near to his people.

In confessing his immanence, we are acknowledging that God is the Heavenly Father of his people. He is a God who has come near to us in the Person of Jesus Christ. What is more, God has given us his written Word so that we might not remain ignorant about him and his ways. The Scriptures are clear that mankind can know and understand God. Indeed, “knowing God is the primary vocation of God’s people.”³ Such knowledge of God is praised in the Bible:

Thus says the LORD: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he

¹ Augustine, *Lectures on the Gospel of John*, quoted in Barrett, M. *None Greater* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019) p.23

² Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a.12.7, quoted by Barrett, pg. 23

³ Terry Johnson, *The Identity and Attributes of God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2019) p. 16.

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understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.” (Jeremiah 9:23-24)

Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people. (Exodus 33:13)

Oh, continue your steadfast love to those who know you,
and your righteousness to the upright of heart! (Psalm 36:10)

And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. (John 17:3)

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:8-11)

Likewise, God’s people are warned against having improper knowledge or no knowledge at all of God.

Hear the word of the LORD, O children of Israel,
for the LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land.
There is no faithfulness or steadfast love,
and no knowledge of God in the land; (Hosea 4:1)

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge... (Hosea 4:6)

The writer of Hebrews rebukes those spiritually immature Christians who should have made progress beyond knowing only the most basic truths. His desire is to teach them the profound truths of Christ’s high priesthood (Hebrews 5:1-10). However, his efforts are limited because they have become “dull of hearing” (5:11). Not only that, their spiritual immaturity has made it impossible for them to understand the deeper truths of God. “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food” (5:12).

God is both incomprehensible and comprehensible. This is not a contradiction. Rather it acknowledges that there are depths to God beyond which our minds are capable of comprehending. Yet it pleases the unsearchable God to reveal himself. So genuine knowledge of God is attainable but only insofar as he makes himself known.

Faith Matters

Romans 1:18-32

Paul identifies the fundamental problem of humanity as ignorance of God. In his sin he suppresses the truth and then exchanges the truth of God for a lie. In so doing his thinking becomes futile and mind darkened to the extent that he worships created things rather than the Creator. From there his depravity only escalates so that he seeks to overturn the very boundaries of God’s creation and become a law unto himself. At the root of human depravity is false beliefs about God.

We cannot hope to attain knowledge of God apart from faith in him. It is true that an unbelieving mind can learn facts about God from the Scriptures. But even those facts that are comprehended will lead to errors. Liberal theology stands as a constant witness to this dilemma of faithless knowledge. The skeptics of higher criticism wrote (and continue to write) massive amounts of commentary on the Scriptures. Yet because of

their lack of faith in such things as the supernatural inspiration of the Scriptures they inevitably deny such essential Christian doctrines as God's triune nature, the deity of Christ, his atoning death, and glorious resurrection. They deny the uniqueness of Jesus and the necessity of the new birth. They cross the lines into universalism and syncretism even though the Bible – a book whose information they have mastered – allows for no such beliefs.

Theologian David Wells observes that “one of the defining marks of our time [is] that God is now weightless. I do not mean by this that he is ethereal but rather that he has become unimportant. He rests upon the world so inconsequentially as not to be noticeable. He has lost his saliency for human life...Those who assure the pollsters of their belief in God's existence may nonetheless consider him less interesting than television, his commands less authoritative than their appetites for affluence and influence, his judgment no more awe-inspiring than the evening news, and his truth less compelling than the advertisers' sweet fog of flattery and lies. That is weightlessness.”⁴

Faith plays an essential role in our knowledge of God. Anselm famously wrote: “For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand.” Only in God's Word may we find an accurate witness to the knowledge of God.

Analogically Speaking

We know from Romans 1 that God has revealed some things about himself in what he has made. Indeed, God has revealed enough about himself in nature to render mankind accountable before him. All men are, to use Paul's words, “without excuse” (Romans 1:20). For redemptive knowledge of God we must have the special revelation of Scripture. In the Bible God speaks to his people. But he does so in a manner which accommodates our frailties. John Calvin compared God's speech in the Scriptures the ways in which we speak to babies or young children; a sort of lisping. How strange it would seem to speak to a baby as though he or she were a 40-year-old adult. And how strange it would be if God spoke to us as though we were somehow on an even plane with him.

So what sort of language is available to us in order to describe God and think of God in ways that are accurate without the expectation that those words and that knowledge are comprehensive?

First two bad options: Univocal and Equivocal

Univocal or “one voice” indicates a one-to-one correspondence. In other words, univocal words are those word which apply equally to more than one thing. We can apply the word delicious both to apple pie and pot roast. We can use the word intelligent to describe both humans and dolphins and it means pretty much the same thing. However, we have no univocal language for God. We cannot use a word to describe ourselves and then apply that same word to God and think that it will mean the exact same thing. For example, when we say that God is holy and that a particular saint is holy, we are speaking of two very different things. We cannot use the word holy (or any other word for that matter) in a univocal way between God and anything else.

But the solution to this is not to retreat to the idea of *equivocal* knowledge and language. For something to be *equivocal* means that all interpretations remain open. Equivocal words have entirely different meanings when applied to different subjects. If I ask you to define the word “bank” you will probably want to know if I mean the institution which protects our money or the portion of land which borders a river. The same word. Two completely disconnected meanings. Think of the old Abbot and Castello bit “Who's on First.” If we take an equivocal approach to language describing God then we have no hope of ever meaningfully speaking of him.

So what is the answer? What is the “baby talk” that Calvin says God has recorded in his word that we may know him truly while not comprehensively?

⁴ David Wells, *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 88.

The answer is *analogy* or *analogical language*. We cannot know God absolutely or comprehensively. But we can know him as he has chosen to make himself known. And God has made himself known to us primarily through language. But this language must be accommodated to us. And so God reveals himself by way of analogy.

Analogical language serves as a way to protect both our minds and hearts from violating the Creator/creature distinction. Analogical language functions to bridge the gap between an indistinguishable one-to-one correspondence on the one hand and a complete disconnect on the other.

We owe much of our thinking about the important differences between univocal, equivocal, and analogical language, in terms of their applications to God, to the Medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274).

Aquinas reasoned that if we try to use *univocal* language to describe God then we will, in effect, erase any difference between God and his creation. On the other hand, he reasoned, that if we use language concerning God *equivocally*, then there would be no possible connection whatsoever between God and his creation. Hence, the necessity of analogical language.

Analogical language makes communication between God and his human creatures possible. It means we can use language about God in a truly meaningful way without making the mistake that we have described him exhaustively or compared ourselves too directly to him. When the Bible tells us that God is good or just or merciful or holy, these are stated analogically. That is, we must understand that God is not good, just, merciful, or holy in the same way that we are (or can be) those things. God's goodness is profoundly different from our goodness. His justice is of a different kind than ours. However, those qualities of God are not so unrelated to our experience that they are rendered meaningless.⁵

We not only use words analogically to speak about God but our whole way of thinking about God must be analogical. Otherwise, we would reduce God in some ways to our level; ways that are inappropriate for us to imagine him. So the Bible's use of analogical language to describe God helps preserve a right understanding of him and ourselves; that he is God and we are not. The analogical language of the Bible also guards our hearts against idolatry lest we think of God as a creature. And the analogical language used in the Bible guards our humility as we are reminded of our dependence upon God to communicate to us in ways that fit our creaturely status.

Analogy – a: a comparison of two otherwise unlike things based on resemblance of a particular aspect;

b: resemblance in some particulars between things otherwise unlike - Merriam-Webster

⁵ Peter Sanlon, *Simply God* (Nottingham, UK: IVP, 2014), p. 41.